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## ETIQUETTE IN THE MESS-ROOMS OF THE BRITISH ARMY

BY FRANK LEVRAY

THE English army before the war was a very aristocratic institution. The law of 1871, passed after the Franco-Prussian War, had suppressed the purchase of officers' commissions—before that time the authorized price for commissions varied from £450, for an Ensigncy in the Infantry, to £7,250 for a commission of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Life Guards—the Royal Warrant abolishing the system of purchase had substituted that of entrance examinations, but, as a general thing, the corps of officers was recruited from the same social class as in the day of Thackeray's novels, partly from the nobility, whose members generally remained but a short time; partly from old military families, true guardians of glorious traditions; and partly also from among the sons of rich parvenus of commerce and industry, who, as in the day of *Vanity Fair*, rose, in wearing the King's uniform, many rounds of the social ladder. The number of officers who had risen from the ranks was very few, and for the most part, were the sons of prominent families who upon their entrance were named for "special recommendation."

Even in later years, when the standard for military studies was very high, officers led an expensive existence. The costliness of the mess, the up-keep of polo ponies and hunters, the luxury of the uniforms, the elegancies of the social life, obliged an officer to spend a great deal more than his pay, and it was practically impossible for an officer to serve, especially in some of the crack regiments, who was not pos-

sessed of large personal resources. The mess in particular constituted a very great expense. This mess, which the Emperor Napoleon III established in the regiments of the *Garde Impériale*, following the example of the English army, which he greatly admired, is not only a place where men meet for their meals, but a club, and very often a club of the most elegant description, maintaining the highest standard of excellence as to surroundings, cuisine, and personnel. The establishment is furnished by the state, and comprises, at least, a dining-room, the "Mess Room," a reception-room, the "ante-room," a billiard-room, a wine-cellar, and all the official apartments necessary for service. The government pays a portion of the furnishings, but all the rest,—the silverware, the china, glass, etc.—is the property of the Mess, and is administered by a committee of three officers. Each newly-admitted officer pays, as in a club, an entrance fee, and annual dues. The government provides a yearly amount for the upkeep of the Mess. The expenses of each officer are paid monthly.

The fittings of the mess of certain regiments are magnificent, the furnishings very handsome, the silver superb, and the wine-cellars of the first quality. The Mess of the Horse Guards and of the Life Guards, of the Foot Guards, and of many other corps that I could name, are in no way inferior in elegance and perfection of style to the most exclusive and expensive clubs of any country. The officers—I speak of times of peace—always at dinner are in "mess kit," the special uniform for

Mess, very elegant, heavily briaded with gold upon the particular color of the regiment—a uniform entirely different from that worn for service, or for parade. Besides the “King’s Rules,” which prescribe the functioning and administration of the Mess, there exist customs peculiar to the different corps, to which not only members of the Mess, but their guests as well, must strictly conform. There is a great deal of entertaining at Mess: there are “Inspection Nights,” and “Regimental Guest Nights,” when the visitors are guests of the regiment or corps, and also “Guest Nights” when individual members may entertain.

This question of entertaining is considered very important. Dining in Mess “is a Parade.” All officers must dine in Mess on “Guest Night,” unless very excellent reasons are given for being absent, but on “Inspection Night,” or “Regimental Guest Night,” they are obliged to be present, and may not excuse themselves.

The intimate relationship which the war has established between the French officers and their comrades of the English army is the cause of many invitations, which will become more and more frequent now that the establishment of peace, and the maintenance of British regiments on French soil for an indefinite period, permit closer friendships; civilians are already, and will in future be still more, in receipt of invitations to Mess from the English officers. Now the *esprit de corps*, the old customs, the usages and privileges of the different corps are carefully and jealously observed by our allies. The new army has inherited them, and is as exacting in regard to them as the old.

The war has admitted to the various regiments a very considerable number of men who have received commissions, but who have had previously no idea of mili-

tary traditions or customs. To assist newcomers—“Warts,” as they call the latest-arrived Second-Lieutenants in military slang—Lieutenant-Colonel E. G. Mackenzie, Staff Officer, Royal Fusiliers, has written a little pamphlet called *Notes on Mess Etiquette*. It should be of interest to all prospective Mess guests. We will give a few short extracts from it. Certainly those who are to have the honour of being entertained by our brave allies and friends will be glad to know of usages and customs, the omission of which would render them conspicuous or ridiculous. They will be happy “to know the ropes,” as General Sir Bindon Blood said in his introduction to the little book in question, and with its aid to avoid “a bad break” (*la fâcheuse gaffe*).

To give an idea of the rules and customs of certain corps, we may cite the fashion in the Royal Marines of drinking the King’s health. The Royal Marines, whose device is “*Per mare, per terram*,” are divided into two corps: the Royal Marine Artillery, and the Royal Marine Light Infantry. These are the crack corps, proud of a glorious history. There are also certain other regiments of infantry which were raised originally as “marines.” These corps insist upon every custom which may recall this fact, and among them all the King’s health is drunk, as in the Royal Marines, that is to say the corps remaining seated, while, in all other army corps the men rise and drink standing. This custom goes back to the days of three-deck vessels, when the rooms of the middle deck, among which was the dining-hall, had very low ceilings, where it would be difficult to stand. Evil tongues pretend that the custom came also from the fact that after dinner the rolling and pitching caused certain convives to find themselves more comfortable seated. The guest who was ignorant of this custom, but only

knew in a general way that in the army everybody arose when the vice-president said: "Gentlemen, the King!" would be embarrassed to discover that he was the only person standing.

The King's health is not proposed at all dinners, it is proposed only on "Band Night," or "Guest Night," when the band of the regiment plays. The King's health is drunk in the following manner: when the repast is ended, the president—before whom the wine is usually placed until it is circulated and poured—rises and says:

"Mr. Vice, the King." The wine then makes the circuit of the table and all the glasses are filled. Under no condition may any one drink or even raise his glass until the toast is proposed. When all the glasses are filled the vice-president rises in his turn and says: "Gentlemen, the King." The band then plays "God Save the King." All the company rises, holding in the right hand the full glass. In certain regiments the officers respond: "The King! God bless him!" after which everyone is seated.

On ordinary evenings the men may leave the table after the wine has been once around, on others it is the custom to wait until the senior officer rises, but on "Guest Night" no one may rise before the senior officer. In some regiments it is the rule that no officer shall leave the Mess until all the guests have left.

The president and vice-president of the Mess are not necessarily the two officers of highest rank. It is a weekly service, taken in turn. During the week the men are "in roster" they take the places respectively at the head and foot of the table. The president is responsible for the conduct of the officers at Mess, and gives the orders to bring the coffee, the cigars, and cigarettes. The vice-president is always the last to leave the table, at least unless he has received from the president

special permission to rise, in which case the president himself will remain until the last.

The officers must be in the ante-room—the room adjoining the Mess-Room, at least five minutes before the bugle sounds the last call to dinner. Smoking is not permitted in the ante-room for an entire half-hour before dinner. When dinner is announced the senior officer present, passes out first, followed by all the others. If there is a guest present, the officer who is his host passes out first with him, if there are several guests, the oldest officer present passes out first with his, and the others follow with theirs according to age. An officer arriving late must excuse himself to either the president or the vice-president, whichever is nearest to his place.

It is not permitted to smoke in the Mess-Room before the end of dinner. In certain Mess-Rooms the president or the senior officer gives the permission to smoke. No one is ever allowed to smoke a pipe.

Each man in his mess pays for what he drinks. "Treating" is considered very bad form, though of course the expenses of a guest are charged to his host. In each Mess there is a "wine book," in which is entered every day the charge of each officer for wines and liquors. If there is a claim through error, it must be addressed directly to the president of the Mess Commission.

When a stranger enters the ante-room it is the custom for all officers present to rise and salute. He is usually offered a drink and a cigarette, this expense being carried by the general account under the heading "Mess Guests."

Never may the name of a lady be mentioned at mess; never may a bet be made there, nor may one ever "talk shop."

In time of peace officers dress for dinner

in "Mess Kit," with the exception of the "Orderly Officer," who is usually in service undress blue. To-day an officer of the Regular Army, or an officer coming from the Regulars, may wear the undress blue every day after six o'clock.

In most Mess-Rooms officers wear long trousers for dinner. If, for any reason, an officer is in breeches, he must excuse himself to the senior officer present in the ante-room, before dinner, for not being in proper dress.

If a guest is himself an officer, he should, of course, be in uniform, but if he is a civilian he should wear a dress coat and a white tie. It would be extremely bad form for a guest to present himself in a "dinner-jacket" (which they call in Paris "smoking-jacket," the English always asking "Why smoking?" the "smoking-jacket" being a dressing gown) with a black tie.

With the exception of the Officer of the Day, officers dining at mess do not wear the belt. It is always worn on special guest nights, or on inspection nights, or other formal occasions, but when an officer comes to dine at a mess as guest, the custom is that he should wear the belt.

It is quite usual for a Mess to nominate officers of other corps, and even civilians, honorary members. In this case the committee addresses to the one so honored a letter or a printed card, asking him to consider himself an honorary member of the Mess during his stay in the district. To this invitation the rule is to reply with a note, written in the third person, thanking the chief of the corps and his officers for their courtesy, and assuring them that

the writer will be happy to avail himself of the privilege. But all this does not mean that the invited member shall use the mess as though he were a member in reality. It is a simple formal courtesy; any one taking the invitation literally, and coming regularly to dine at the mess would be considered very badly informed.

When one speaks to an officer, or of an officer, one designates him by his rank: Major X., Captain Z., but when it is a subaltern, that is, a Lieutenant, or a Second-Lieutenant, one calls him Mr. Y., and not Lieutenant Y. The same rule holds in addressing a letter. We write: Captain Z. and Y. Esq.

It is forbidden to bring dogs to the Mess. In most regiments a fine of five shillings is imposed on the owner of a dog found within the precincts of the Mess.

No matter if you have at your side the most magnificent sabre in the world, a precious "arm of honor," etc., never think of drawing it from its scabbard in the Mess, even to display it. You would be loaded with fines from every corner of the room.

When the wine is passed around the table it is well to remember always to pass it "as the hands of the clock move," that is, from left to right. It would be a grave fault to fail in this matter.

It is a good rule, when invited to dine at a Mess, always to ask one's host if his regiment has special customs, for, I repeat, most regiments are very jealous of their privileges and traditions, and it is a matter of simple courtesy to inform one's self, and observe them.—*Le Correspondent*.

—*Translation, Lotus Magazine.*